

Revelation: Growing Radical Faith

Darrell Johnson has written, “If it ever became illegal in my part of the world, as it actually is in other places at this very moment, to own a complete copy of the Bible—and if the authorities, as an act of mercy, allowed me to possess just one book of the Bible for “personal” use—I would, without hesitation, keep the last. I would keep the book of Revelation. Why? Because no other book of the Bible presents the gospel as powerfully as the last book does. No other book of the Bible, in the face of all that threatens to undo us, proclaims the good news of Jesus Christ the way the last book does.

More particularly, in no other book of the Bible do we see Jesus as clearly and compellingly as we do in the last book....I am convinced that no other book helps us see Jesus as he is right now as clearly and compellingly as the last book John wrote. No other book helps us see Jesus relative to the movement of history the way the last book does. No other book helps us see Jesus relative to “the powers” at work in our time the way the last book does. *No other book helps us see him in a way that overcomes our fears and frees us for radical faith.* And no other book, in all of human literature, crystallizes what it means to belong to and follow Jesus in this world.”¹

While most series on discipleship use the gospels or epistles as their primary text, Darrell Johnson’s case for Revelation as a “discipleship manual” is particularly challenging and inspiring. The book is all about Jesus Christ. Johnson entitled this book Discipleship on the Edge because

“Revelation is not a crystal ball revealing esoteric secrets that enable one to escape the harsh realities of life on earth, but a down-to-earth manual on how to be a disciple of Jesus facing the harsh realities of life on the earth; in particular, how to do this the way Jesus did and does. And *edge* because...that is the “place” where we are called to be Jesus’ disciples.”²

Revelation: Jesus Breaking Through

The title is “The Revelation,” “The Revelation of Jesus Christ.” Literally, the title is “The Apocalypse.” Sadly in our time the word “apocalypse” has come to mean “Oh no! Something terrible is about to happen!” Thus we sadly speak of storms and natural disasters as being “of apocalyptic proportion.” I say “sadly” because that is not at all what first-century people would have thought when they heard the word “apocalypse.” They would have thought of something more inviting, something immediately impacting the way they lived 24/7. The word simply meant “unveiling.” It was used of lifting a cover off a box or pulling back a curtain in the theatre. The word meant “opening up.” Or more dynamically “breaking through.”

Unlike people today, New Testament Christians eagerly awaited and longed for the future. They believed the complete reign of Christ on earth was a more certain reality than the seeming victory of evil. Jesus gave John the strangely beautiful vision recorded in the Book of Revelation to give us hope. Of the three Christian virtues—faith, hope and love—the one most needing attention today is hope. Revelation touches us at the point of our despair, our world-weariness, our future shock, our fear of persecution, our collaboration with a sick (though friendly) society. It is quite possibly the most relevant book of the Bible for this moment in history.

¹ Darrell Johnson, Discipleship on the Edge: An Expository Journey through the Book of Revelation, p. 13.

² Ibid, p. 15.

But how are we to understand this highly symbolic book? Since Revelation was meant to be read at one sitting (1:3), we do well to put aside the charts, sermons and films we have seen that claim to unravel its mysteries. It is better just to read it. A child might understand Revelation better than adults who approach it with preconceived systems. If a child were to hear this as a story and were to conclude, "I'm so glad the Lamb won over the awful beast," he or she would have truly heard it and taken to heart what is written in it (1:3).

Two Common Misconceptions

Many people misunderstand the book because of two commonly held misconceptions. First, Revelation is not difficult to understand. Though it is highly symbolic, it is not a lock whose key has been lost. The major reason we have difficulty decoding the symbolism of this book is that, unlike the first readers, we are largely illiterate when it comes to the Bible.

The Old Testament provides the most important clues for decoding Revelation. Of the 404 verses in Revelation, 278 allude to the Old Testament (though not one direct citation is actually quoted). The book is a biblical implosion. Old Testament ideas, symbols, names and themes have been powerfully pulled together through the inspiration of the Spirit to form a collage, a kaleidoscope effect in the message John brings.

For example, a phrase like "God will wipe away every tear from their eyes" (7:17) is a creative adaptation of Isaiah 25:8. Proper names like Balaam, Jerusalem and Sodom and concepts like "the tree of life" are adapted from John's Bible. Numbers like "forty-two months" are used symbolically, as numbers like "seven" are in the Old Testament (Dan 9:27). This book above all others in the New Testament must be interpreted by Scripture.

Second, we misunderstand Revelation when we treat it as a book of predictions. It is not so much a prediction of future events as it is an exposé of spiritual realities that affect us now and will bring the events of history to a worthy end. John shows us how the world looks to someone in the Spirit.

As Nelson Kraybill explains,

“Revelation refers to itself as ‘prophecy’, which can be confusing because modern English uses the terms ‘prophecy’ and ‘prediction’ interchangeably. But biblical prophecy often has more to do with spiritual insight into the writer’s immediate circumstances than with forecasts of the distant future. John’s vision gave insight into ‘what must soon take place,’ in his era (1¹). The seer knew nothing of global warming, the Internet, or the United Nations. He wrote a scathing critique of political idolatry in the first-century Roman Empire, not an analysis of Al Qaeda or the inequities of modern globalization. But just as the letters of the apostle Paul have become God’s Word for us today when the Holy Spirit breathes through them, so God uses Revelation to illuminate our theological and political landscape. Rather than starting with the expectation that Revelation will forecast events of our time, we should seek to understand the life setting of John and the believers to whom he addressed his book. With that background, we then can listen for what the Spirit is saying to the churches about faithfulness to Jesus Christ today.”³

³ J. Nelson Kraybill, *Apocalypse and Allegiance*, p. 22